Title
Redefining Worker Identity During the 1920s

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Redefining Worker Identity During the 1920s
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Between 1923 and 1929, a period of economic optimism and low unemployment in the United States, a Chicago based firm, Mather and Company, printed and distributed hundreds of motivational workplace posters. These posters were designed to be hung in factories and offices across the country. Many of the Mather posters expressed ideas that one might expect to see in workplace posters, such as having a positive attitude and being punctual. (fig. 1) Others celebrated the notion of cooperation through the language of teamwork. This is not surprising given that the 1920s have been called the Golden Age of Sport, and saw a proliferation of company based sports teams. At first glance these posters seem charmingly banal, the kind of workplace rhetoric designed to motivate and inspire workers to basic good behavior. But considered in light of the labor history of the period, a very different, surprising perspective emerges.

Mather and Company produced these posters at a time when labor, especially radical labor, was weak. Radical labor groups such as the Industrial Workers of the World had faced harsh governmental persecution for their opposition to World War I, as well as further repression during the Red Scare of 1919. Despite the diminished power of labor and a discrediting of labor values during this period, many Mather posters deployed language intimately associated with the labor movement; much of this language was that of the radical fringe who had, only a few years earlier, been branded traitors. An underlying assumption of the labor movement was that through collectivism the asymmetrical power of worker and employer could be mitigated. Eugene Debs, speaking at the founding convention of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905, asserted that as workers, “... we depend absolutely upon each other. We must get close together and stand shoulder to shoulder. We know that without solidarity nothing is possible, that with it nothing is impossible.” Notions of solidarity, mutuality, and teamwork were featured repeatedly in the Mather posters. While expressions of individualism and success through personal striving did appear in some, many others celebrated communalism and success through cooperative efforts.

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The idea of teamwork is given expression in *All Together Pull* (fig. 2). This poster offers a powerful image of masculine solidarity. “Giving up” or “slumping” (or what we might call “slacking”) are wrong, according to the poster, not merely because these behaviors reveal weak character, but because of how they impact one’s fellow workers. “Pull Together When You Want To Win” asserts the power of working together and cooperating with the group in order to achieve success. By utilizing this rhetoric, business interests claimed the moral ground that labor had staked out. Not only does the poster make an argument about the right kind of worker, it also makes an argument about the right kind of man.

The Mather poster *Think “I” And You Work Alone* (fig. 3) doesn’t articulate ideas of heroic individualism, as one might expect in the era when Charles Lindbergh was achieving what had, a generation earlier, been inconceivable. The language and imagery of this Mather poster assert that the way to succeed is through cooperation and mutuality. “One helps another and both progress.” The man in the poster struggles up the mountain but his individual striving is hopeless because he attempts to do alone what can only be achieved through cooperation. The poster argues that workers who think only of themselves are doomed; it is only through teamwork that difficult tasks can be accomplished.

An articulation of this same idea can be found in “Solidarity Forever,” the IWW anthem written in 1915, sung to the tune of “John Brown’s Body.”

> When the union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run
> There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun
> Yet what force on Earth is weaker than the feeble force of one but
> The union makes us strong.

It is not surprising that the IWW anthem celebrates solidarity, but it is unexpected in a motivational workplace poster.

Another celebration of mutuality can be found in *The Teamworker*. (fig. 4) The idea of mutuality and group identity is once again deployed in an attempt to shape the idea of the right kind of worker, one who is “always busy - always working with others - always getting things done.” The final line offers an unexpected twist. “For All Is For Yourself” affirms the importance of individual achievement, yet places individual achievement firmly in the realm of communalism. Although the language of the poster touches on individual success, the non-verbal element of the bumblebee and the language of “always helping others” offer a clear message of

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the power and value of group identity and solidarity. The animal depicted is not a lone wolf atop a mountain or a mighty stallion thundering across the plain, but rather a bumblebee, who works industriously and in harmony with his fellow laborers for the greater good. “For All Is For Yourself” also echoes the rallying cry of the IWW, “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

Even posters that disparaged labor organizing did so based on the values of labor ideology itself. The figure in *Dissatisfied Men Make Everybody Miserable* (fig. 5) who relentlessly harangues the crowd, trying to stir up discontent, is criticized in the poster because, among other things, “He thinks so much about himself, he is always miserable...” In the world of the Mather posters, it was the socialist or the communist rabble-rouser who was too individualistic. It is surprising that individualism was grounds for critique at all in this period between the Progressive era and the New Deal era. The 1920s were a period when, as historian Michael Parrish argues, the country, weary of lofty idealism and disillusioned by war, turned to individual concerns. A negative view of individualism was central to IWW philosophy as well. An example can be found in a comment by IWW activist Joe Hill. He is said to have described the type of worker who wouldn’t organize as, “...an 'I guy'...” contrasting such a person with members of the IWW who, he said, “happen to be 'we guys'.”

Not only did these posters deploy labor language and ideology, but they evoked the visual symbols of the IWW as well. The Mather poster *Why Bow Your Back* (fig. 6) frames workplace conflict as petty arguing that “wastes time - kills teamwork - stalls progress” and neatly deflects the idea that there could be legitimate worker complaints. The image of the cat does not refer simply to “fighting like cats and dogs” but rather represents something very specific about class politics.

The famous IWW image, sometimes called Sab Cat or Sabotabby, (fig. 7) was the symbol for sabotage, which essentially meant to work slowly, or otherwise disrupt production without calling a full-fledged strike. To the IWW, the sabotage cat evoked a powerful tool available to workers who might not have had other means of protest available to them. Between 1917 and 1919, newspapers reporting on the IWW trials repeatedly connected the black cat symbol and sabotage. I found over a dozen such articles. One example from *The New York Times* reported that, “The black cat with outstretched claws, so universally used by the organization, is indeed a fitting symbol for a revolutionary society which has openly declared again and again during the present trial that its purpose is unceasing warfare to exterminate the

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wage system and seize the industries of the nation." This Mather poster utilizes the iconography of the IWW, but dramatically reshapes its meaning. The poster delegitimizes workplace complaints altogether, arguing that unhappy workers are merely trouble makers or have bad attitudes. The French bulldog stares plaintively, pleading for harmony and goodwill, while the cat, stridently aggressive, refuses to compromise and be sensible.

One can look at these posters and see merely old-fashioned exhortations to good workplace habits and behavior. But my research suggests that many of the seemingly innocuous expressions of goodwill and teamwork were in fact highly political and strategic. By redefining the very meaning of teamwork, mutuality, and solidarity, the Mather posters appropriated the language of labor, but dramatically reshaped its meaning.

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